1-1-1979

The Humanities and Dance: The Contemporary Choreographers' Response in the Arts to Aesthetic and Moral Values

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Published version. *Dance Dimensions*, Vol. 3, No. 5 (1979): 8-13, 35-36. Publisher Link.

"THE HUMANITIES AND DANCE: THE CONTEMPORARY CHOREOGRAPHERS' RESPONSE IN THE ARTS TO AESTHETIC AND MORAL VALUES"

By Curtis L. Carter

I first learned of the Des Moines Ballet project on the humanities and dance in the early summer of 1979. The proposal was to provide the public in four Iowa cities with a scholarly examination of dance in conjunction with a performing tour of the Des Moines Ballet. The project coincided perfectly with my own interests as a philosopher-aesthetician and critic who specializes in dance. The project sounded exciting; it was a fresh approach to exploring the relation of the humanities to the art of dance, but funding for the project has not been confirmed.

In mid-July I received a letter formally inviting my participation. The letter and a copy of the grant proposal outlined an ambitious program for a series of symposia and performances in Davenport, Dubuque, Cedar Rapids, and Sioux City. The symposia on the topic, "The Contemporary Choreographer: Response in the Arts to Aesthetic and Moral Values in Modern Society," were to include panel discussions with humanist and dance scholars from colleges and universities in the four areas and myself. The Des Moines Ballet and guest artists Ann Marie DeAngelo and John Meehan were to perform in each site.

My responsibilities as outlined were 1) develop the format and background materials for the symposia, 2) prepare program notes and excerpts from writings on dance, 3) prepare an opening lecture for the symposia on the relation of humanities to dance, and 4) address the audience at the outset of each performance.

Speakers on the panels were sufficiently diverse to reflect a broad sampling of humanities perspectives including the disciplines of

English literature, philosophy, and sociology. Representatives of ballet, modern dance, and the choreographer Jorge Samaniego interacted with the humanities representatives to address the subject of the modern choreographer in relation to aesthetic and moral values.

Audiences for the symposia included the public interested in dance, dance students and teachers, patrons of the arts, and scholars from related fields. The precise audience mix varied with the settings, which included municipal performing art centers and art galleries and a university campus. The direction of discussion varied with the backgrounds of the speakers and the audience. In Davenport, for example, the discussion centered mainly on dance, since all of the panelists except myself were professors or practitioners of dance and many of the audience were local dance instructors. In each of the other settings the panelists were balanced between humanist and dance representatives, with a corresponding broadening of the discussion to address the topic from the point of view of the humanities. The panelists agreed upon the need to link dance to other academic disciplines. They also agreed that dance is a fundamental means of communication. A professor of English drew analogies between the languages of writing and of dance. Another panelist noted that contemporary dance attempts to express, in its own idiom, both abstract concepts and specific emotive states such as joy and rage. Thus it is a medium of communication with analogies to literature, the other arts, and even to such intellectual disciplines as philosophy. Another panelist commented on the importance of dance as a collaborative art--one capable of uniting ideas and media from other disciplines. A philosopher-panelist attempted to explore the perceptual response to dance, applying his philosophical training to the problem, and a sociologist demonstrated the usefulness of her methods to the study of dance's societal aspects.

The discussions were successful in opening the dialogue between dance and the humanities. Humanists' presentations sometimes

suffered from inadequate knowledge of the dance, and dancers were sometimes unable to focus on the broader issues of the proposed topic. The panel discussions did inform humanists and dancers of the others' perspectives and thereby provided the beginning for future dialogue.

My lecture for the symposia illustrated some uses of aesthetic theory for writing and lecturing on dance. The content of the lecture consisted of a brief analysis of the concepts, "dance," "choreography," "value," and their application to changing developments in modern choreography. The discussion was centered on the problem of the apparently differing approaches to dance taken by exponents of this art form. Slides showing these changes in ballet and modern dance were incorporated in the lecture.

In my mind, the most unusual aspect of the project was the attempt to bring the humanities directly into contact with the performance. This was to be accomplished by my appearing before the audience at the opening of the performance to explain the project and discuss the development of choreography, etc., in connection with the works appearing on the evening program. This part of the project was in many respects the most challenging and the most fun. How would the dancers and the audience feel about such a presentation in a concert setting? After all the dancers had come to dance, and the audience had come to see dancing. Where would I fit in? The project's success depended on a good working relationship between the dancers and myself. I was aware that the dancers would be skeptical. Dancers' natural antipathy toward words is well known. How would they feel about 15 minutes of their performance being given over to words? I was certain, moreover, that they knew far less about philosophers than I did about dancers, so they would not know what to expect from a philosopher-aesthetician; they undoubtedly had their reservations. My unfamiliarity with the company was a source of uncertainty for me. What was their professional and artistic level? These questions were eased somewhat by my visit

to observe the company and to be observed, in late August. I was impressed with the discipline and the enthusiasm of the company.

My proposal was to make the opening presentation as much a part of the performance as possible. Choreographer Jorge Samaniego accepted this idea and agreed to choreograph the movement to be used in conjunction with my script.

The process that we followed introduced me to the backstage aspects of preparing for a theatrical performance--technical and artistic. I observed and rehearsed with the dancers in preparation for each performance, trying to absorb as much as possible the spirit of their creative efforts into my own presentation. The presentation grew as we moved from one site to another, evolving gradually toward a theater piece in itself.

After brief remarks to explain the project, I spoke of the meaning of "humanities," explaining the historic and current meaning and methods. I said, for example, "In the broadest sense the humanities scholar is a student of human culture. His tools are primarily critical reasoning and verbal analysis, and he frequently finds that aesthetic and moral values are his subject matter." I went on to explain that scholars from the philosopher Plato to the present have written about dance, and that there is a growing interest among humanities scholars today in this art form. I explained my own approach to dance as a philosopher-critic who specializes in dance aesthetics.

I then illustrated the use of aesthetic theory by applying the concept of dance style, defined as the particular movement language of the choreographer and the choice of music, stage design, and costume which augment the movement, to the changing developments in ballet. In conjunction with these developments, I noted correspondence of changes in dance styles to changes in aesthetic and social values. Throughout this commentary the dancers performed, in full costume movements to demonstrate the changes that I was speaking about. In turn, I moved about the stage in relation to the placement

of the dancers, and interacted with them on the stage. The remarks included reference to works that the audience would see later in the performance.
How did it turn out? The choreographer and the dancers were wonderful in their cooperation. They responded very positively to the spirit and intent of the verbal content. The feedback that I received from the audience indicated a positive reception of the combination of humanities concepts with the performance.

There were unplanned spin-offs that also bear on the establishment of relationships between the humanities and dance. An informal round table discussion on philosophy and dance with guest artists Ann Marie DeAngelo of the Joffrey Ballet, John Meehan of American Ballet Theater, choreographer Jorge Samaniego, and myself produced a three-hour tape on the topic of how philosophy relates to dance. This tape, which incorporated the views of performers, choreographer, and philosopher, is being edited for future publication. Beyond this, my own knowledge of dance as a performing art has benefited significantly from this concentrated exposure to all aspects of the dance company routine during the ten-day tour.

During the two months that have lapsed since the project there has been time to reflect on the project. As far as I know, the idea of using a philosopher in conjunction with a touring dance company is a first. Similarly, the scope of the attempt to explore the relation of humanities discipline to dance in this project extends beyond previous efforts.

All of this effort raises anew the question, "Why should the humanities be involved with dance?" Why in particular, should a philosopher-aesthetician be commissioned to work with a performing dance company?

My own situation as a philosopher-dance critic illustrates the role of the humanist. My training has been in philosophy with specialization in aesthetics of the philosophy of the arts. I first began

writing on dance as a critic, and this interest led me to apply my other training to dance. In my case, criticism provides first-hand observations which, combined with precise training as a philosopher, serve as a basis for writing and speaking about dance. My approach to dance differs therefore from the perspective of a writer who has, for example, studied only dance, journalism, or sociology, by virtue of the specialized training in philosophy and aesthetics. Philosophy allows me to put in abstract terms the things that I see and provides categories of thought for understanding dance in relation to other human endeavors. Philosophy allows dance to be seen as a genuine art form, rather than simply as sport or entertainment. If I were viewing paintings or sculpture, for example, I would try to show their relationships to theories of art and to aesthetic and moral values. In this project we are attempting a similar thing for dance.

One of the things that the humanities provide is a vocabulary and a set of concepts for speaking about dance. The term "choreography," for example, is a combination of two Greek words meaning "dance" and "writing." "Choreography" provides a natural link between the two activities that concern our project: making dances and writing or speaking about dance. A choreographer, or one who makes dances, provides the subject matter for the humanities scholar who then comments on the dance.

There are mutual benefits to both the dance and to the humanities. Dance gains in public acceptance as humanist scholars are able to interpret to the public and to the scholarly community its significance as a creative art in past and contemporary societies. In the past. respected philosophers and literary figures treated dance as a matter of course. Plato wrote, for example, that dance was an essential part of education and community life. Philosophers and essayists in every generation have affirmed this view. Humanists today are perhaps less aware of the dance

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than in previous centuries when, for example, literary giants such as the French writers Gauthier and Mallarme wrote at length on the dance. There is, however, a growing interest on the part of philosophers and other scholars in the humanities in writing about dance, corresponding to the increasing popular interest in dance performances.

At this time, therefore, dance presents new opportunities for scholars in the humanities to explore. Unparalleled creative developments and increases in performing activity have brought dance to a new artistic height, with American choreographers and dancers leading the way. There

is only the beginning of a corresponding tradition of studies of the dance by humanity scholars. Compared to art or music, dance aesthetics, philosophy and history are considerably under-developed, as are the cross-disciplinary relationships of dance to studies in literature, history of civilization, the sciences, and the other arts.

The Des Moines Ballet project is especially important as a model for initiating cooperation between humanities scholars and the art of dance. The project offers a vehicle for sharing with the public the insights that a humanities scholar brings to the dance. At the same time, it provides the humanist scholar opportunities to learn about the art from first-hand observation and participation. It is rare that a scholar would have the opportunity to see the full range of processes--rehearsal, class, make-up, technical stage work--from

the insider's perspective.

It is important to consider briefly how to continue. One suggestion would be to try a similar project in other sites, revising the public format based on its trial run this past year. A second step would be to develop a project to encourage the schools at the various levels, and including colleges and universities, to develop the interrelationships of the humanities and dance in their programs. Finally, the project should be further refined and offered as a model for use with other dance companies across the country. All of these efforts will help to break down artificial barriers that presently divide our experiences unnecessarily into compartments, and will enable us to build upon the natural interrelatedness of the humanities and the arts.

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December, 1979

*A version of this article will also appear in Muses.